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ABSTRACT

In view of the pending reauthorization of Head Start in 2003, this paper presents information on the effectiveness of Head Start, alternatives to Head Start, program funding, performance standards, and other issues germane to its reauthorization. Topics considered in the question-and-answer format of the report are: (1) Head Start benefits for children; (2) changes in the program; (3) state prekindergarten programs; (4) program funding; (5) coordination of services for preschool children; (6) the need for comprehensive services for Head Start children; (7) literacy needs; (8) parents' views of the program; (9) teacher qualifications; (10) student assessment and current accountability measures; (11) enrollment; (12) benefits of Early Head Start; and (13) program improvement. The report closes with recommendations for Congressional priorities when the program is reauthorized, including moving toward full funding of Head Start over the next 5 years, expanding Early Head Start, further improving the quality of Head Start, preserving the focus on comprehensive services, providing additional flexibility to local programs, and addressing in an open forum proposed Head Start changes regarding a national assessment. (Contains 20 endnotes.) (KB)

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HEAD START REAUTHORIZATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. Does Head Start work?

Yes, Head Start works. Head Start is one of the most researched and evaluated early childhood programs in America. These studies conclude that Head Start works.

According to latest study conducted by the federal Department of Health and Human Services, called FACES, Head Start is giving America's poorest children what it promises—a head start in preparing them for school. The data show that:

- The program narrows the gap between disadvantaged children and all children in vocabulary and writing skills.
- Head Start children are leaving the program ready to learn.
- Once in kindergarten, Head Start graduates make substantial progress in word knowledge, letter recognition, math skills, and writing skills relative to national averages.[1]

Numerous other studies confirm that Head Start is effective. They find that children who have graduated from Head Start are:

- Less likely to repeat a grade.
- Less likely to need special education services.
- More likely to graduate from high school.[2]

2. Do Head Start benefits fade out over time?

NO. Research clearly shows that Head Start benefits do not fade over time. When various studies that supposedly indicate "fade out" are re-examined, taking into account methodological problems, and when we examine a comprehensive set of measures for children (rather than just IQ), we find that Head Start children clearly demonstrate that they have obtained lasting educational benefits from the program.[3]

3. The children are not reaching national norms—so it's not working.

In serving the most disadvantaged children, Head Start children often enter the program significantly behind, but they catch up. Children coming into Head Start have so many barriers even before they enter the program:

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- Nearly 28 percent of parents with children in Head Start—more than one in four—have less than a high school diploma or GED.
- Almost half of Head Start parents make less than $12,000 a year.
- Almost a quarter of children served in Head Start come from homes where English is not the primary language spoken at home.[4]
- About one in five children "were reported to have been exposed to community or domestic violence in their lives."
- Almost one in every six Head Start children has one or more disabilities—generally a speech or language impairment. Nearly half of all children's disabilities were identified after the child entered Head Start, indicating that Head Start is critical in both identifying and serving children with special needs.
- The early literacy skills of the average child entering Head Start are significantly below—a full standard deviation below for the *average* child in the program—national norms.[5]

Despite these barriers, and from starting so far behind, these children, with the help of Head Start, catch up.

- Head Start children are close to norms after kindergarten.
- The program narrows the gap between disadvantaged children and all children in vocabulary and writing skills.
- Children who enter Head Start with the lowest scores in cognitive development show the greatest improvements.
- Head Start graduates in kindergarten continued to make substantial gains in word knowledge, letter recognition, math skills, and writing skills compared to national norms.
- Children who were behind in a specific skill area continued to gain ground in these skills in elementary school.[6]

4. Haven't Head Start studies shown that children only know one letter of the alphabet?

No, in fact, most studies show that they are on track for entering kindergarten ready to learn. The most recent comprehensive study shows that the children are learning the letters of the alphabet, and on average are leaving the program knowing nearly 9 letters. Researchers conclude that children catch up on literacy skills and by the end of kindergarten, 83 percent of Head Start graduates recognize most or all of the letters of the alphabet.[7]

Are we satisfied with Head Start's progress? Of course we are not. But the solution is more resources and continuing to raise the bar for teachers, not questionable schemes that distract from serious efforts to help the program to improve.

5. **Isn't Head Start an old program, stuck in its ways?**

Head Start has been a dynamic program—constantly working to improve services for children. For the past four decades, Head Start program has worked to increase the quality of programs while expanding the number of children served. Over the years, funding has been reserved for improving quality, raising teacher salaries, and helping teachers improve their education. Education requirements for teachers have been increased several times. An intensive system of monitoring local programs has been put in place and programs that are not meeting standards lose their funding. In fact, since 1993, over 160 programs that failed to correct performance problems promptly were replaced with new grantees.[8]

Program quality standards have continually been updated and strengthened. A careful process was put in place to develop outcome measures to ensure that children were succeeding. Teachers were asked to assess children's progress against these measures three times a year. In the last two years, the program expanded its focus on literacy and language development to help children enter school ready to read.

With increasing evidence demonstrating that the earlier children and their parents are reached, the better their chances of success, Head Start responded. In 1993, Early Head Start was created to serve infants and toddlers.

Head Start remains as important as ever, helping millions of children in poverty get the learning opportunities, nutritious meals, health care, and social and emotional support that they need to enter school ready to learn. The founding principles of Head Start—that disadvantaged children need comprehensive, quality early education to start school ready to learn along with their more advantaged peers—are no less critical today.

6. **Should Head Start be given to the states? Can't they do a better job of coordinating the program with other services?**

Giving Head Start to the states, without performance standards and without additional funding, will not improve services for poor children and families. Improving the quality of Head Start and expanding its enrollment is the fastest and most efficient way to ensure that our poorest children enter school ready to succeed. Why create chaos by dismantling the program and leaving the fate of our poorest children to 50 states currently struggling with staggering budget deficits? (State legislatures face a minimum shortfall of almost $70 billion for next year.)

States' commitment to prekindergarten, at $2 billion, is much less than the federal contribution. While 45 states invest in prekindergarten, the bulk of the funding is located in just 10 states and as we speak, states' existing commitment to early education is unraveling. Governor Pataki's budget completely eliminates New York's Universal

Prekindergarten program. You can't coordinate with something that's not there. In this environment, instead of improving and building on Head Start's success, states will be tempted to use Head Start dollars to fill in gaps in their own programs and spread dollars more thinly.

More responsibility to states in prekindergarten will go the same way as the President's education reform bill—states will be asked to come up with resources they don't have to do the job while the federal government passes the buck.

The President vowed to make educating every child a number one priority, but followed with a 2003 budget that proposed the smallest education budget in seven years. This year's budget for Title I, the largest source of federal aid to disadvantaged youth and the President's centerpiece of education reform, falls $6.15 billion short of what was planned under the President's own education bill. His budget also cuts funds for state and local teacher quality programs, despite the fact that improving the quality of teachers is perhaps the single most important factor in closing the achievement gap between low- and high-income children.

This year's budget makes similar empty promises to young children. It barely increases Head Start to cover cost of living, cuts child care assistance for at least 200,000 children over five years while increasing work requirements for poor mothers, and strips basic health protections for millions of children. ***How does this budget get children ready for school?***

As states try to meet the enormous demands of the education reform without adequate resources, they may be tempted to focus their early education programs on narrow academic measures that do not truly represent what children need in order to enter school ready to learn. Only 12 states are on track to comply with even half of the major federal requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act.[9]

There is no guarantee that strong performance standards and accountability measures would be maintained if states took control of Head Start. While Head Start standards require a comprehensive, on-site monitoring visit once every three years, 21 states with pre-kindergarten initiatives either do not require any monitoring or only require written reports without on-site visits.[10] Head Start has extensive quality standards and regular monitoring to ensure these standards are met.

Head Start has maintained a generally high level of quality—a study found that the average quality rating of Head Start programs was higher than that of other early care and education programs. But, without federal performance standards, there would be no guarantees that this level of quality would be maintained. States have not demonstrated a commitment to strong standards in their programs for young children. For example, 30 states allow teachers in child care centers to begin working with children without receiving any training in early childhood development.

States would use some Head Start funds to cover administration of the program. This means that there would be less funding for children in need of Head Start's programs.

Currently, Head Start programs are administered at a regional level through the Department of Health and Human Services. Ten regional offices coordinate trainings, perform monitoring and oversight and work to ensure that the programs are reporting and held accountable to strict federal standards. If the program was devolved to states, these functions would have to be assumed by every state department of education. Studies by the General Accounting Office show that states often use a significant amount of federal education dollars to cover their operating expenses. On average, states used 6 percent of all federal funding for elementary and secondary education to cover operating costs for state education agencies.[11] Why spend these administrative costs in 51 separate agencies? It is more efficient to keep Head Start fund flowing directly to local agencies and maintain the administration in centralized regional offices.

7. **Isn't there a lot of funding in the program already?**

Yes, but there are even greater needs. Head Start is currently funded at $6.54 billion a year, enabling over 900,000 children living in poverty to participate. But, only 3 out of 5 children eligible for services find a slot in a Head Start classroom and only 62,000 infants and toddlers—just three percent of those eligible—are served in Early Head Start.

Additional resources are needed not only to reach more children but also to support continued enhancements to meet the changing demands of children and families and provide the highest quality services. For example, most Head Start programs operate on a half-day schedule, though parents often need full-day care to accommodate their work schedules. Programs also report serving more children with behavior problems and more children from families where English is not spoken. These issues often mean that programs must adapt teaching practices and services to meet the particular needs of children.

Head Start programs need additional resources to promote continued improvements in teacher educational requirements and teacher salaries. Head Start has made significant progress in the past several years toward meeting the requirement that by 2003, half of teachers would have an Associate, Bachelor's or related degree in early education. Retaining these teachers will require higher salaries, which current average $21,750 per year.[12] Additional resources will also be needed to provide ongoing training to all teachers to continue to support children's learning.

8. **Couldn't we serve more children if Head Start, child care and prekindergarten services were coordinated better?**

- ***Coordination can—and does—help, but it is no solution for the lack of resources in all of these programs.*** Head Start, child care and prekindergarten programs already coordinate--with many Head Start programs providing full day services by leveraging child care subsidy funds. In fact, 42 percent of families who reported a need for full-day, full-year early care and education received this extended care either directly through the

Head Start program or through collaborations between Head Start and child care providers.[13]

Similarly, prekindergarten services often co-locate with Head Start programs to provide extended education and comprehensive health and nutrition services to a larger group of children in need. Coordination is working in these early childhood programs without devolving Head Start, and its high quality standards, to the states.

Coordination though, will not remedy the fact that all of these programs are severely under-funded. Head Start serves only 3 out of 5 eligible preschool children and only 3 percent of the eligible babies and toddlers. Investments in state prekindergarten programs are much less—often these programs target low-income four-year-olds exclusively, and still state budgets serve just a fraction of those eligible for services. In child care, only 1 out of 7 eligible low income children receive a subsidy to help their parents pay for services.

Finally, Head Start, child care and state preschool programs must often serve the same children in order to meet the demands of working parents. Head Start programs are typically half day, and many state prekindergarten programs run for only 2 ½ hours a day. Even if parents enroll their children into one of these programs, their work schedules demand that they find care to cover the additional hours that they work. This means that in addition to Head Start or state prekindergarten, parents need a child care subsidy to help them pay for care for the rest of the day, or into the evenings and on weekends. These services are not duplicative—in fact, they are all needed in order to address the diverse and demanding schedules low-income parents work to make ends meet.

9. Why do we need comprehensive services for Head Start children?

Comprehensive services are critical to early learning. Head Start targets the nation's poorest children, those living in families at or below the poverty level as well as children with disabilities or other special needs. Preparing children to learn is about more than just learning numbers or letters. It is also about giving children the skills and abilities that will make children good learners throughout their school careers—curiosity, an interest in learning, and the ability to pay attention in class. Therefore, Head Start emphasizes not only children's cognitive development but also their social, emotional, and physical development and has a very strong parent involvement component.

Regardless of their innate abilities, children learn better when then have good physical and mental health and have families whose own needs are met so they can devote their energies to nurturing and educating their children.

- Researchers show that even mild undernourishment, the kind most frequently found in the U.S., impairs cognitive function and can do so throughout the life of a child.[14]
- One study found that children participating in a quality early childhood program that included a strong health as well as a parent involvement component had higher rates of high school completion and lower rates of school dropout.[15]

Recognizing that children do not come in pieces, Head Start—along with early educational experiences—provides health screenings, immunizations, mental health counseling, dental services, nutritional meals, and parental supports.

While the Administration's plan claims that states will have to offer comprehensive services, it eliminates the standards that require them, skimps on the resources to prove them, and includes no enforcement mechanism to ensure that states would provide children these supports.

10. Shouldn't the program just focus on literacy?

We should be doing more for Head Start children on literacy. Head Start has never been satisfied with the status quo. It should be doing more for children's literacy and language development. But, dismantling the program and giving it to states does not accomplish this goal.

Instead, we should be expanding the program to serve more children, ensuring that the teachers have a degree in early childhood education and know how to teach children early literacy skills.

Yet, everything we know from the literature says that literacy alone is not the answer. All parents know that for children to learn, they must also have their basic needs met—they must be healthy, well-fed, and have parents who are actively involved in their lives and their learning.

11. Don't most parents say that Head Start doesn't work for their children?

No, most parents support Head Start. The Head Start FACES study shows that over 98 percent of parents were satisfied with how the program helped their children grow and develop, and 96 percent of parents were satisfied with their child's preparation for kindergarten. Over 97 percent of parents said they were satisfied with the program's openness to their ideas and participation.[16]

A customer satisfaction survey for federal government programs found that Head Start's rating was the highest out of 29 other public agencies. Head Start parents scored the program higher than the private sector's average.[17]

12. Why should teachers have a Bachelor's degree? Is it true that Head Start teachers are poorly trained?

Head Start children deserve to have the highest qualified teachers in their classrooms. Researchers have concluded that a teacher with a Bachelor's degree in early childhood education is key to achieving positive child outcomes for three- and four-year-olds. One of the largest national studies on early care and education, conducted by the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development, showed that caregiver education and

training were the strongest predictors of quality in programs for preschoolers. Further, in the National Research Council's report, *Eager to Learn*, early childhood researchers reviewed the evidence from numerous studies and recommended that all children have access to a teacher with a Bachelor's degree related to child development and early education.

Many Head Start teachers already have extensive formal education as well as training in early childhood education. Head Start programs require all teachers to have at least a Child Development Associate credential and half of all teachers to have at least an Associate degree by 2003. Head Start programs have worked steadily to achieve these goals, and at the end of 2002, 51 percent of all teachers in Head Start had at least an Associate degree in early childhood education or a related field.[18]

13. Why shouldn't we test children in Head Start; what current accountability measures are there?

Experts agree that child assessments, when done correctly and used for the right purpose, can support better child outcomes and program quality. But, as the National Academy of Science reports in Eager to Learn: Educating our Preschoolers, "[F]ew early childhood teachers or administrators are trained to understand traditional standardized tests and measurements."[19] As a consequence, misuse is rampant, as experience with readiness tests demonstrate.

Experts on child assessment agree that the specific testing approach for young children proposed by the Bush Administration will inevitably lead to "teaching to the test," a narrowing of curriculum, and encouraging teachers to neglect critical components of children's growth and learning. This type of assessment is both limited and short-sighted in terms of helping children in Head Start develop content knowledge, motivation to learn, and the ability to develop complex thinking skills—things we know from research are imperative for school success.

Head Start already assesses children in their programs. Currently, Head Start programs are required to assess children three times a year in order to strengthen classroom teaching and evaluate children's progress. These assessments are performed using multiple techniques, as the research suggests—gathering information through teacher observations, analysis of children's work samples, documentation of performance, parent reports, and direct assessment. The assessments must also cover all eight aspects of child development: language, literacy, math, science, art, social/ emotional, approaches to learning, and physical health and development.

Further, program evaluation and monitoring—not young child assessments—have proven to be successful tools in holding programs accountable and supporting their improvement. The Head Start Outcomes Framework currently defines strong performance standards for programs and mandates that all Head Start programs undergo PRISM, a thorough, week-long performance monitoring (known as PRISM) conducted by outside, independent evaluators every three years.

14. Aren't Head Start programs under-enrolled?

Most programs are not under-enrolled. In many communities, children are on waiting lists to enter the local Head Start program. However, with welfare changes, in a few communities mothers returning to work may find that their incomes now exceed Head Start's very low eligibility—set at the federal poverty line. This does not mean, though, Head Start services are not needed. Many parents with incomes slightly above federal poverty have children that would benefit from Head Start's valuable programs.

We should provide more flexibility where there is under-enrollment. Providing programs with more flexibility to serve families with incomes slightly above the poverty line could remedy under-enrollment in many of these communities. Additionally, allowing programs to serve more infants and toddlers would also allow programs to fully enroll eligible children in the program. Currently, only 3 percent of eligible children under age three are served through Early Head Start.

15. What are the benefits of Early Head Start?

Early Head Start significantly improves children's outcomes. Research clearly demonstrates that to have a positive impact on the lives of children, we must start early. Recent findings from brain research show that the first three years of life are critical in children's brain development, and that their brain development is far more susceptible to adverse influences than had been realized. What these studies clear show is that the earlier the investment, the greater the pay-off. Early Head Start has demonstrated the ability to make a positive impact on the lives of children and families. For example:

- Early Head Start programs produces positive cognitive impacts for children at age two.
- The program also showed significant impacts on language development from ages two to three.
- The program had favorable impacts on several aspects of social-emotional development at age 3. Children were more engaged with their parents, more attentive to objects during play, and were rated lower in aggressive behavior.
- Early Head Start also parents. Research finds that parents participating in the program are more emotionally supportive, more supportive of early language development, and more likely to report reading daily to their child. [20]

16. How could Head Start be improved? What should Congressional priorities be when it reauthorizes Head Start in 2003?

- ***Over the next five years, move toward full funding of Head Start.*** The Head Start program provides comprehensive early education to over 900,000 low-income children every year. Yet, only three out of five eligible preschool children find a slot in a Head Start classroom. We must ensure that by 2007, no preschool child who needs Head Start is turned away from the program.

- ***Expand Early Head Start.*** Research clearly demonstrates that to have a positive impact on the lives of children, we must start early. The earlier the investment, the greater the pay-off. Currently, only 62,000 children under the age of three—just 3 percent of those eligible—are served in Early Head Start. Early Head Start is the only comprehensive federal program that targets children this young. We must continue our national commitment to our youngest, most vulnerable citizens. At a minimum, the number of children participating should double over the next five years.

- ***Further improve the quality of Head Start.*** Head Start has been a leader in advancing the quality of early educational programs for low-income children. Over the last five years, Head Start implemented the most comprehensive set of performance standards for the education of young children in the nation. Programs worked to ensure that at least half of all teachers in Head Start had, at a minimum, an Associate degree in an early childhood or related field by 2003.

  The National Research Council recently recommended that teachers of all preschool age children have a Bachelor's degree related to early childhood development. With additional funding for teacher education and salaries, Head Start should work towards this goal.

- ***Preserve a focus on Head Start's comprehensive services.*** To ensure that vital, comprehensive services remain a part of Head Start, the program must remain a federal program housed within the Department of Health and Human Services.

  Head Start is the nation's only program that works to address the needs of the whole child. The creators of this initiative understood that in young children, cognitive development cannot be separated from the development of social skills, emotional growth, physical health, and nutrition. Along with early educational experiences, Head Start provides health screenings, immunizations, mental health counseling, dental services, nutritional meals, and parental supports. Without these vital services, early learning will be severely impaired.

- ***Provide additional flexibility to local programs.*** Welfare-to-work initiatives in recent years have meant that families who would have been eligible for Head Start are now earning enough to put them just over the income requirements. Communities should be allowed more flexibility to serve children from families with slightly higher incomes. This will ensure that in these communities, more low-income working families can participate in the program and that no space in Head Start goes unfilled.

  Similarly, many programs throughout the country find that the demand for services for infants and toddlers continues to expand. We recommend that Head Start programs be allowed to retool and serve younger children if they can demonstrate a strong demand for Early Head Start services and show that they are serving all the eligible three- and four-year-old children who need Head Start in their community.

- ***Address proposed Head Start changes regarding a national assessment in an open forum, ensuring that national experts are included in the dialogue.*** Recent Administration proposals have suggested several fundamental changes to Head Start,

including a new national test for all four-year-olds in the Head Start program. Many of these initiatives are being proposed without Congressional oversight.

Any significant change to the program should be undertaken with thorough review and debate. Head Start children deserve the best thinking on issues of assessment and curriculum. We urge Congress to require that a wide range of national experts be convened to thoroughly review these sweeping proposals. Further, Congress must ensure that any new initiative should have adequate funding and a realistic timeline for implementation.

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